Oral History Interview with
Charles Voorhis

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Charles Voorhis Summary

Charles Voorhis (1870-1961) was an executive at the Nash Motor Company and founder of the Voorhis School for Boys in San Dimas, California. The school, founded in 1928, provided an education and room and board for boys from troubled or poor households. Voorhis' son, Jerry Voorhis (1901-1984), served as headmaster of the school until 1936, when he was elected to the United State House of Representatives. Two years later, the elder Voorhis decided to close the school and donate the campus to the state of California. The site was used as the southern satellite campus of California State Polytechnic School in San Luis Obispo. The Voorhis Campus, as it was known, would eventually develop into California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

Subject Headings

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Voorhis, Charles
Voorhis, Jerry
Voorhis School for Boys

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Charles Voorhis

January 7, 1960

Interview Conducted by Robert S. Beall
Transcribed by: Andy Kung

RB: I have a list of general questions here if you don't mind or.

CV: Hmm?

RB: I have a list of general questions here.

CV: Yes, [inaudible]. Now you have a thesis to write.

RB: Yes sir.

CV: And I don't know what just you want, but that machine, you're not going to use that with your thesis.

RB: Oh no, I take this home and transcribe this myself.

CV: Oh, I see.

RB: [inaudible] and it makes a lot more easy, cause it makes it a lot more easier because you don't have to sit there and try to take notes and everything and you know, it'd be more of a conversation. One thing I was very interested in is, what your family background, what I'm trying to do on this paper, I'm starting out by giving history of yourself and some information on Jerry [Voorhis], and I read his masterpiece on the [inaudible].

CV: You did what?

RB: I read his masterpieces, remember the one he wrote, back in 28'. I took a lot of notes out of that. Do you remember a Kenny Hobbs?

CV: Hobbs?

RB: Hobbs, yeah. Remember him? Well he's teaching out of a; you remember a Mr. Hobbs out there in San Dimas? He was an orange grower and.

CV: Is he connected with the lemon?

RB: Yes.

CV: Well I've known him.

RB: Well his son went out to your school.

CV: He did?

RB: Yeah, and he's at our school now, he teaches out there. He's a Doctor in Inspections and Services and he filled me in a lot about how the school ran out there when he went out there and then go in contact with. Do you remember a Mr. Miller, Head of Athletics, S.D. Miller. It's been a little while ago, I just happen to run across the name in the paper and.

CV: I [inaudible] remember a Miller who was in charge of Athletics, but I don't [inaudible].

RB: I ran into his name in the phonebook, first I saw it in a paper then I found all these names of people who used to work out there, and I checked him on the phonebook, and I ran across him and he still lives in San Dimas so I'm going to go interview him on some of the school curriculum. But what I want from you is your personal background and these types of things because you and Jerry were the dynamic force behind the school and I'm sure there are people in the future and right now who would like to know about you and Jerry and what your part was and building a school.

CV: Well, now let's see, you got some questions there you want to ask.

RB: What was your, I'm not trying to make these personal questions.

CV: [inaudible].

RB: What was your family's background? In other words what kind of business was your dad in, your mother and where they lived? This type of thing.

CV: You won't want to use all this, but I was born in Olivet, Kansas, March 31, '71. Then we moved, my father moved to, we moved Russell, Kansas in '71 or '72. I forgot. I was just a year old and we moved there [pause] until I went to [inaudible] school in Racine College, Racine, Wisconsin. Did you want to put that down or?

RB: That's on the tape.

CV: Hmm?

RB: That's on the tape. We don't have to worry about that because even when I go home, I'll just type it off that. I'll just play that back.

CV: Is this going on the tape now?

RB: Yes, it's all on. We have a full hour of tape there.

CV: That's alright. Then, I went to school at Kansas State University.

RB: What was your major?

CV: Hmm?

RB: What was your major went you went to school?

CV: Well, I didn't have a major. As a matter of fact, I was irregular. As a matter of fact, I spent two years at K.U. preparing for College, well then things were going badly out in Western Kansas, where we lived, and I got a job playing baseball when I was at K.U. and I got a job playing baseball with the [inaudible] local [pause] ball team, amateur ball team.

RB: What position did you play in?

CV: Second base.

RB: Second base.

CV: Yeah, and then I went to work for the [inaudible] investment company in [inaudible], Kansas, and from there I went to Kansas City with the [inaudible] investment company as cashier of the company.

RB: Did you start out as a clerk or did you go right in to cashier?

CV: In the beginning, I started out as clerk. As a matter of fact, I got a job because I was a ball player.

RB: That's an unusual turn.

CV: Then from Kansas City I went back to Ottawa in hardware and implement business. The Franklin County Hardware Company was the name of the company. Then some people, some three men, came along and wanted to buy me out and I sold out. I went to Denver, where Mrs. Voorhis was born, and from there I went back to Ottawa and I got a job as traveling salesmen in South West Oklahoma and the [inaudible] of Texas.

RB: You were on the road quite a bit then after that weren't you.

CV: Hmm?

RB: You were on the road quite a bit.

CV: Quite a bit, and then [pause] I was made manager of the Kingman Plow Company of Oklahoma City, and from there I was called to the Main Office of the Kingman Plow Company, in Peoria, Illinois, as Assistant General Manager [pause]. And from there I went back to Ottawa in the Hardware and Implement Business.

RB: You went back to Ottawa again?

CV: Yes, and you see now [pause], then I was called back to Kansas City as Manager as the Kingman Branch there. Then I was called to Peoria as Assistant General Manager of the Kingman Plow Company and from there I went with the General Motors company, [inaudible] concern. I had known Mr. Nash from the old Implement days, and he became President of the reorganization of the General Motors company and I was made General Sales Manager of the Oakland Motor Car Company of Pontiac at that day. It's now Pontiac but it was the Oakland Car in those days. Then, Mr. Nash asked three men to go with him [inaudible]. Can you stop that?

RB: No, that's okay you can go back. Don't worry. [laughs] It's just a conversation.

CV: Mr. James J. Storrow of Boston was, at that time Chairman of the Board of Directors of General Motors Company. Mr. Nash was living with General Motors Company and he asked three men to go with him to [pause]. Wait a minute, Mr. Storrow had said to him Nash, you're leaving General Motors. Alright, I want to build a Nash car.

RB: Was he being just let go or?

CV: Hmm?

RB: Was he just being let go from General Motors or leaving on his own?

CV: Mr. Storrow, Mr. Nash was leaving on his own, and Mr. Storrow was leaving, and he [inaudible] to build the first Nash car, and I went with Mr. Nash to Kenosha, Wisconsin where I was there 13 years with the Nash Company.

RB: Is that when you were Sales Manager?

CV: I was Sales Manager and Vice President. [Pause]

RB: Don't let this disturb you.

CV: Back in [pause], I've forgotten about the year, but I resigned from the Nash Motor Company and we moved to [inaudible]. Jerry had been very much interested in youth; he devoted a great deal of his time to youth. I decided that that was going to be his work so Mrs. Voorhis and I found this place near San Dimas which comprised 150 acres that I bought from—

RB: Mr. Johnson?

CV: Mr. Johnson, and we built the school, and which consisted of a schoolhouse, administration building, you'll get all of that from the newspaper report.

RB: Why did you happen to go out to California? How'd you happen to pick this?

CV: Well that came later.

RB: Oh, excuse me.

CV: We—this was not built as an institution, but it was built as a home for boys needing a home—for ten years we had 60 boys at our school near San Dimas. Everything was furnished, these boys, and they were cared for until they finished High School, when they were headed in getting a position, a job.

RB: You helped them find a job?

CV: Yes, yes all of them, and I'm proud of all but three or four of them.

RB: That's a very good record.

CV: [Pause] Our old boys, are some of them Master Mechanics, some of them are School teachers, some of them have very fine positions. Some of them were still in the army, one boy, one of our boys is in the Intelligence Department.

RB: How much did it cost to keep care of these boys?

CV: It cost a thousand dollars a year per boy.

RB: Per boy, now did you get this from outside source or did you [inaudible] it yourself.

CV: I furnished all the money.

RB: How much did it cost to build the school? That's a beautiful school.

CV: Well about two million dollars.

RB: It looks it. Now one thing that's interested me how—did you—how come the school finally closed down?

CV: Well, this way. Jerry went to Congress. He was elected in '33 and he was in Congress for ten years. Then he was defeated and immediately he went into the work of the Cooperative League. He has a very responsible and enlightening job. He is the Managing Director; he became Managing Director of the Cooperative League at the United States. He is a member of the Executive Committee, the National Executive Committee. He has to travel a great deal and flies a great deal. The meetings of the National Association are practically all held in Europe, he had one meeting in Berlin, he had one in Paris, one in Rome, and three, four other meetings. That's incidental, but that's part of his job.

RB: So, this pulled him away from the school quite a bit then?

CV: Well, he was connected to the school after he left Congress. He went immediately into this other work, the Cooperative Work, and he has always been unusually interested in boys. He has done a great of work with boys and besides the other things that he has done.

RB: Did you still have—when you closed the school down was it mostly because he was away or did you have—?

CV: No, it happened this way: When Jerry left Congress, he immediately was accepted this position with the Cooperatives where he is now Managing Director. What was the question you asked me?

RB: Why did you close the school down?

CV: Oh, after Jerry left Congress, we then faced the problem as to what he was going to do. I could no longer run the school because of my age and so forth and also because of financial reasons. Because it cost about a thousand dollars a year per boy, and to keep them in school from furnishing them clothing, food, place to live, [inaudible] we didn't build an institution and when they finished High School, local High School, there then they had to go out and get a job that we helped them do and that was quite interesting. Personally, I had a good deal to do with that but you don't need to say that. But Jerry found the place for these boys and most of these boys have made good. We have three of four boys, three boys in the [pause]. I can't think of it, I've been sick for four, five months and I uh—

RB: I'll just ask you one more question.

CV: That's all right, you go ahead. Cause I'll try to answer these questions. With foreign embassies, we have one boy in France, we had one of our boys in Japan, he learned the language during the war, he learned to speak it and write it and was in the service in capacity that required those things. Another one of our boys is [inaudible] in the army, and in the Intelligence Department, he's been sent all around the world, that boy.

RB: You had a really good success with them didn't you, with the boys?

CV: Yes.

RB: How come you gave to Cal Poly?

CV: The school?

RB: Yeah, how come you gave it to Cal Poly?

CV: Well, as I say for the reasons that I gave you, I decided that I had a problem.

RB: I mean—

CV: Jerry for instance, which was [inaudible] by his going into the Cooperatives. Then I had my problems, financial problems.

RB: How come you didn't just sell it?

CV: Hmm?

RB: How come you didn't just sell it?

CV: I gave it away.

RB: I know, that's what I'm wondering, how come?

CV: Alright, I wanted it used for some purpose that has [inaudible] had been used for as possible. So, I had a friend that lived just across the [inaudible] from the school. He had come over to see me one day and it was Landon, and we were visiting and I told him my problem. "Well" he said, "that is strange." He says, "I'm going up to San Luis Obispo tomorrow and I know McPhee very well, [inaudible] I have something to do with the school up there." "Well" I said. And he said, "I think that he can use it; they're looking for a place down south here for another branch of the school, the—"

RB: Agricultural part?

CV: Yes, what do you call the name of the school?

RB: San Luis Obispo?

CV: San Luis Obispo, and he said that "if you'll like to have me, I'll speak to him about it," which he did do. I got a phone call from McPhee the next day to ask me about it and I said, "Yes. I'm looking for someone. I'm looking for some institution that will carry on this work as nearly as we planned it as possible." And he said, "Well, when can I [inaudible]?" I said, "Any time." Well he and the State Superintendent of Instruction, I've forgotten his name, but it was back in that time, you can find out from your papers what his name was. I can't think of it right now, and they were down the next day.

RB: They made a fast trip.

CV: That was in June, well we discussed the thing and I wired to Jerry and he came right out. He was in Washington at that time. He hadn't turned things over to the new man, but he came right out and we four men sat down and I explained the situation. And McPhee said, "We're looking for a place down here." "Well" I said, "let's go look at it. I and my family want to give this school, which cost about two million dollars, to someone or some institution that will carry it on." And he told me that San Luis Obispo [inaudible], what do you call it? Cal Poly?

RB: Yeah, Cal Poly.

CV: Was looking for a place down here. They had no citrus up north; they couldn't teach Agricultural citrus problems up there. Well, to make a long story short, before they left there that day, before they left there I had already had, we had agreed to give the school to San Luis Obispo.

RB: Did you make any conditions when you gave it?

CV: Yes, there were some conditions, the principal condition was that it was to be used for the boys' school and—just a minute—and as long as it was used, it should be known as the—

RB: Voorhis campus, or?

CV: As the Voorhis Campus, [inaudible] the transaction was agreed to and that was in June. They moved in in September. They took everything that was there, the beds, and the furniture, the pictures, the kitchen.

RB: How about the [inaudible]?

CV: Well, that is still owned by Jerry.

RB: That's what I thought.

CV: Yes, that's still owned by Jerry.

RB: When they took and moved in enough, say girls come to the school, would that make any difference as far as the Voorhis if we had girls come to Cal Poly. Would that be an issue?

CV: Not now. In the beginning they were not supposed to but I'm willing, that was discussed a little later. I'm willing that girls should come to school there, six or seven hundred of them and that's not bad in my judgement, [inaudible] arrangement now that girls will come to the school. Where they will be all put into the old school or not, or into the new school, I don't know. Those are questions to be discussed and decided but they got that administration building. Those buildings are well built.

RB: [Inaudible].

CV: A long time.

RB: I know.

CV: We have a fine orange grove but during the war, the gophers got in there and ruined that but that can be brought back again.

RB: Would you mind if I stopped in here again sometime to visit you?

CV: I'll be very glad to have you.

RB: Because, I mean I certainly enjoyed this today, but I have better get going back now.

CV: Well, alright.

RB: I don't mean to be rude.

CV: That suits me because I may be feeling better at that time.

RB: Well, I know you get a little bit tired after a while.

CV: Yes, I'm tired. I had a kidney removed and I can't walk very well, and I should quit now.

RB: I thought you were getting a little tired.

CV: In the meantime, you can, you'll be thinking of some other questions that you want to ask, I'll be glad to try to answer them.

RB: Well, you've done very well sir. I certainly appreciate your help.

CV: Well, your name is?

RB: Beall, Sir.

CV: Beall.

RB: Yes sir.

CV: Alright.

RB: Thank you very much.

CV: Alright.

End of interview

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